Building Better Partnerships for Aboriginal Education

A Summary of Concepts and Key Considerations

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Project Writer

A Summary of Concepts and Key Considerations was written by:

Mary-Anne McNeney

Project Consultants

From R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd.:
Robert Malatest
Joanne Barry
Sharon Krebs

Dr. Kenneth Whyte

Project Advisory Committee

Sherry Wright, Parent Representative

Brenda Turner, BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils

Gayle Bedard, Principal
BC Principals' and Vice-Principals Association

Gary Doi, Superintendent
BC School Superintendents' Association

Brian Matthew, BC Teachers' Federation

Lillian George, Vice President
United Native Nations Society

Tim Low
Métis Provincial Council of British Columbia

Karen Horner, Coordinator
First Nations Special Education Resource Line

Bobbi Johnson, Trustee SD #83

Vonnie Hutchinson
Haida Education Director

Ministry Staff

Lorna Williams
Director
Aboriginal Education
Enhancements Branch
Ministry of Education

Heather Morin
Education Officer
Aboriginal Education
Enhancements Branch
Ministry of Education

Gerald Morton
Manager
Student Assessment and Program Evaluation Branch
Ministry of Education

Ann Garside
Education Officer
System Performance Branch
Ministry of Education

BUILDING BETTER PARTNERSHIPS FOR ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Successful education is about successful partnerships. Students, parents, community members, educators, trustees and administrators all have important roles to play in supporting student achievement.

With this in mind, communities have built various frameworks for education partnerships. School boards, for example, encourage the involvement of a broad range of community members in education planning and decision-making; Parent Advisory Councils and School Planning Councils encourage meaningful parent involvement; and organizations such as Aboriginal Education Committees invite participation from Aboriginal parents and Aboriginal community members.

These types of partnerships generally work well, but there is always a need to improve and enhance parent involvement – especially considering that research and experience have found it is the single most important determinant of students' success in school.

This is a critical point for all education partners, and has added significance for Aboriginal families. Parent and public opinion surveys have found that, overall, Aboriginal parents are less satisfied with the education system, and have different views about their role in, and relationship to, the system. Furthermore, many B.C. schools do not have specific plans in place to engage Aboriginal parents. These issues must be addressed as part of the continuing effort to better support Aboriginal (and, indeed, all) students' levels of achievement in British Columbia.

Recognizing the range of cultural, historic and other issues affecting Aboriginal communities; this paper discusses some of the challenges involved in school-Aboriginal parent partnerships. It also outlines a range of models, strategies and approaches for building and strengthening such partnerships for the future.

Because there is no single solution, the paper does not make any recommendations. Instead, it presents ideas that all education partners can discuss and consider – alone or in combination – to build Aboriginal parent involvement strategies that meet the specific needs of their districts, schools and communities, and create successful partnerships.

BACKGROUND

Recognizing the need to strengthen Aboriginal parent engagement, two branches of the Ministry of Education – the Aboriginal Education Enhancements Branch and the Student Assessment and Program Evaluation Branch – commissioned a research project in the fall of 2001. The purpose was to identify strategies that schools, districts and Aboriginal communities could use to build and strengthen school-Aboriginal parent partnerships.

The research process included a comprehensive literature review; surveys of Aboriginal education co-coordinators from all regions of B.C.; visits to seven districts and 24 schools; and interviews with administrators, teachers, Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal parents. It also included focus groups with Aboriginal students and parents, and an information session in Vancouver.

A full report on the research and its findings is available on the Internet at http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/. Generally, the studies produced a consensus that:

- schools and districts are experiencing difficulties in meeting provincial policy requirements to involve Aboriginal parents, families and communities in public education;
- cultural and other barriers often hamper communication between schools and Aboriginal families; and
- actively promoting parent participation will require a change in the way schools, administrators and teachers interact and communicate with Aboriginal families.

The research also found that various strategies have been developed – and used with varying degrees of success – to build and strengthen school-Aboriginal partnerships in British Columbia.

These strategies are examined in some detail in the balance of this paper. Schools, districts, Aboriginal communities and others seeking to build better school-Aboriginal partnerships can also benefit from two other products of the research:

- a literature review of past studies and initiatives related to school-Aboriginal parent communication and interaction; and
- a collection of examples of approaches used across the province, some of which may be considered best practices in particular situations.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The work discussed in this paper is not new. Schools, districts and Aboriginal communities have been working for years to build stronger, more successful partnerships. The challenge now is to build on these, and make them as strong and effective as possible, to better support Aboriginal students' achievement.

Schools and districts are encouraged to develop their own, innovative partnership strategies, reflecting the unique needs and realities of their schools and Aboriginal communities. All such strategies should, however, reflect the following principles:

Mutual Respect

Teachers and administrators are better equipped to communicate and build partnerships with Aboriginal families when they understand and respect the importance of Aboriginal culture, practices and history. This includes the history of residential schools.

Aboriginal families can support effective partnership building by respecting and supporting school and district efforts to become more culturally aware, and to better support Aboriginal student achievement.

Patience

Building successful partnerships takes time and persistence. Trust cannot be established overnight. Patience is required on all sides as relationships are forged and developed.

Inclusiveness

All parties need to work together to establish effective school-Aboriginal parent partnerships. For example, Aboriginal parents are more likely to "buy into" a strategy when they are included in the various stages of its development. Similarly, Aboriginal families can encourage a climate of inclusiveness by inviting school staff to participate in social, cultural or other events in the Aboriginal community – or by accepting invitations to participate directly in school or classroom activities.

Leadership

School districts can play a leadership role in supporting and developing parent engagement strategies by, for example, consulting the local Aboriginal Education Committee on matters related to Aboriginal education and inviting committee members to participate in school board meetings. Districts can also lead by supporting funding initiatives and programs that promote Aboriginal parent engagement.

Aboriginal parents and community members can provide leadership in various ways; for example, they may share their knowledge or expertise in the classroom. Parents who are actively engaged in their children's education may also help to encourage other parents' participation.

Proactive Promotion

It is essential that the existence and purpose of all school programs and services – including those specifically related to Aboriginal students – be well communicated to all school staff, and to Aboriginal students and their families. It is also essential to clearly communicate any expectations for participation in these activities.

Generally, effective parent-engagement strategies do not stand-alone; they should be seen as part of a continual process of outreach, promotion and communication with a full range of education partners.

Long-Term Commitment

Building trust is essential to building effective partnerships and there is no quick fix when it comes to forging relationships. Education partners agree that short-term programs (those in place for a year or less) are generally ineffective. Programs and strategies should be in place for an extended period (three years or longer).

Sharing Successes

This paper offers one example of how all parties in the education partnership can share and benefit from one another's experiences. Meetings, conferences and Web sites also offer opportunities for sharing successful ideas, models and approaches among schools, districts and communities.

Respecting Individuality

Although people can learn from one another's successes, it is vital to recognize that no single strategy will work for all schools, districts or communities. The specific needs of local Aboriginal students and parents are best met when schools consider all their Aboriginal communities in the development of strategies and programs. Gathering input from many community members is an important step in building appropriate, meaningful and effective partnerships.

Measuring Progress

Performance measures and targets should be built in to all school and district parent-engagement strategies. These should be both quantitative (e.g. the number of parents participating) and qualitative (e.g. surveys to gauge parent, teacher or other levels of satisfaction).

Measuring progress will allow schools and districts to assess how effectively their strategies are working, and to make adjustments or improvements as needed.

OVERVIEW OF STRATEGIES

Across British Columbia, schools and districts have undertaken a number of different strategies and activities to build and strengthen partnerships with Aboriginal parents and families. In general, these fall into five broad categories:

- governance initiatives;
- Aboriginal support services;
- school orientation activities;
- cultural awareness and inclusiveness activities; and
- community inclusiveness activities.

Each of these is discussed in greater detail below. Related issues, such as the potential strengths and weaknesses of each approach, are discussed in the following section, titled *Observations*.

Governance Initiatives

In most B.C. school districts, an Aboriginal Education Committee either guides or makes decisions about Aboriginal education programs and services. In many districts, committee members include a mix of educators, Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal community members, such as parents.

Some districts are actively working to encourage Aboriginal parent participation in these committees, Parent Advisory Councils and school boards. Several districts have also formalized partnerships between school and Aboriginal communities through Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements and Local Education Agreements. Such agreements are seen as a positive step, acknowledging schools' responsibilities to Aboriginal parents, families and communities.

Aboriginal Support Services

All B.C. school districts have Aboriginal support services, such as:

- home-school liaison workers whose role includes encouraging and supporting Aboriginal parents to participate in school activities
- Aboriginal advocates whose mandate is to help Aboriginal parents understand and, where appropriate, challenge the education system to accommodate Aboriginal values and/or cultures
- Aboriginal support workers who primarily support Aboriginal students' academic achievement; and

Aboriginal Support Services – cont'd

- Aboriginal family resource workers who primarily support Aboriginal students in the context of their families and communities.

These staff plays a critical role in – but are not solely responsible for – supporting effective school-family communication and interaction, both of which are vital in building successful partnerships. Experience has shown that these staff can work best when their efforts are supported by the entire school community.

School Orientation Activities

Many schools and districts have attempted to make the school environment more welcoming for Aboriginal parents and families – especially those new to a school. Typical activities include:

- orientation days for new Aboriginal students and their parents before the start of classes;
- one-on-one meetings for Aboriginal parents with their children's teacher(s) and/or the school's Aboriginal support staff; and
- distribution of a handbook for parents that plainly outlines school policies, programs, supports and expectations.

These activities can be instrumental in partnership building. However, the examples above reflect a European perspective and may not be effective in reaching Aboriginal families.

Cultural Awareness and Inclusiveness Activities

Many districts employ support workers of Aboriginal descent whose role is to support the development of awareness of Aboriginal issues and cultures among teachers, administrators and other school staff. These workers are typically involved in:

- developing local Aboriginal curriculum or teaching resources;
- assisting teachers in terms of curriculum and communication targeting Aboriginal issues; and
- providing professional development activities to enhance awareness and understanding of Aboriginal issues.

A number of schools and districts also make an effort to directly involve Aboriginal families in school activities, by:

Cultural Awareness and Inclusiveness Activities – cont'd

- inviting parents and elders to participate in classroom activities, either by teaching culturally-specific skills or hosting discussions about Aboriginal issues, history and/or culture;
- jointly hosting dinners or other meals with a local band;
- holding Aboriginal culture days;
- organizing parent-student sweat lodge activities;
- staging "play" potlatches; and
- holding post-secondary nights for Aboriginal students and their parents.

Some schools have also established rooms, designated for the specific use of Aboriginal students and parents. These are often co-located with the office of the school liaison or other Aboriginal support worker(s).

Community Inclusiveness Activities

Some schools welcome Aboriginal families to use local school facilities during off-hours for community activities such as meetings and celebrations. Some districts, in consultation with Aboriginal organizations, have also designed specific programs and services for Aboriginal parents such as workshops and seminars on issues such as literacy and self-esteem, based on parents' stated interests. Some recreational and extra-curricular activities are also specifically designed to welcome Aboriginal parent participation.

OBSERVATIONS – CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The five types of activities and strategies discussed above have met with varying levels of success in British Columbia. Recognizing that every school and community is unique, the following section outlines key considerations that education partners should take into account when designing, or building on, strategies to strengthen school-Aboriginal parent partnerships.

The observations noted here reflect the views of more than 160 people involved in Aboriginal education, interviewed between the fall of 2001 and the spring of 2002. A full report on the research is available on the Internet at http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/.

Governance Initiatives

These provide a means for direct Aboriginal parent and community involvement in decisions around planning, structuring and funding Aboriginal programs – and education in general. Overall, they are seen as an important first step in ensuring that school programs and services meet the needs of Aboriginal families and communities.

Key considerations in developing or expanding governance initiatives include:

- recognizing that governance structures (such as Aboriginal Education Committees, Parent Advisory Councils and School Boards) cannot, on their own, increase or enhance Aboriginal parent involvement; they do, however, provide opportunities for involvement, and can facilitate the introduction or expansion of programs/services that specifically support better school-parent partnerships
- recognizing that parent involvement in governance structures is not a substitute for other types of parent involvement in education
- recognizing that some Aboriginal parents may need considerable support and encouragement to participate in governance structures
- viewing Aboriginal parents and families as full partners in Aboriginal students' education; many schools are working to fully involve Aboriginal families in school activities and decision making; some schools have also partnered with local bands, Friendship Centres or Métis associations when designing new programs and policies

ABORIGINAL SUPPORT SERVICES

These services are widely seen as a key component of any broader strategy to enhance Aboriginal parents' involvement in education. Aboriginal support workers can play a critical role in communicating and building trust with Aboriginal families.

Key considerations in developing, expanding or improving these services include:

- recognizing that Aboriginal support workers are not solely responsible for enhancing school-parent communication; this responsibility is shared by the whole school community, including parents themselves
- recognizing that Aboriginal support workers are not solely responsible for Aboriginal students; in some schools, there are concerns that teacher communication with Aboriginal parents has declined because there is a perception that all issues related to Aboriginal students "belong" to Aboriginal support staff
- ensuring that communication with Aboriginal families involves more than simply discussing students' problems; in order to build trust and a true sense of partnership, teachers, support workers and/or administrators should also talk to parents on a regular and consistent basis about their children's progress, interests and activities in school
- using a range of methods to communicate with families; written information and phone calls are convenient and useful, however, face-to-face interaction is often the preferred form of communication in an Aboriginal community; visiting parents at home can help to bridge the gap; it may also help some parents overcome a general lack of trust in the education system
- communicating clearly; educators and administrators often use school jargon that is not understood by parents of any cultural group; if the use of specific educational terms is needed, they should be explained in everyday language.

SCHOOL ORIENTATION ACTIVITIES

These can be helpful in building relationships, letting parents know they are welcome in their children's school and giving them a clear idea of what to expect in their role as education partners.

Key considerations in this area include:

- recognizing that people of European descent may have very different ideas about what is welcoming, compared to people of Aboriginal descent; for example, Aboriginal parents may prefer to discuss school policies and programs face-to-face, rather than being given an introductory handbook; some parents, especially those affected by residential schools, may also hesitate to visit a school at all; therefore, orientation may need to start with some kind of outreach to people's homes and communities
- recognizing that orientation is only a first step; initial meetings should be used as the basis for future, ongoing communication between schools and families
- ensuring that orientation activities and materials are welcoming; for example, Aboriginal parents may feel more comfortable entering a school that visibly displays its respect for, and celebration of, Aboriginal culture.

Cultural Awareness and Inclusiveness Activities

These help to make schools and school employees more aware of, and sensitive to, Aboriginal cultures and can be a significant help in building positive partnerships. Key considerations when planning these activities include:

- recognizing that there is not just one Aboriginal culture; the Aboriginal population in any given school may include diverse groups of Aboriginal people
- acknowledging the potential shortcomings in Aboriginal teaching resources; many are excellent, however, there is consensus that considerably more – and more up-to-date – material is needed, especially with respect to local Aboriginal cultures and issues
- acknowledging the past; many people say it is critical for school staff to understand, and respect, the impact of the residential school system on Aboriginal people's perceptions of education
- recognizing that Aboriginal parents themselves may have a lot to teach school staff about local Aboriginal culture, history and issues; some schools have seen positive results from inviting parents and elders to participate directly in problem solving, local curriculum development and/or classroom activities

Cultural Awareness and Inclusiveness Activities – cont'd

- ensuring that activities are not restricted to the school environment; teachers, administrators and other school staff are encouraged to meet with parents at the local band office, community centre or Native Friendship centre and to participate in events hosted by local Aboriginal communities; for their part, Aboriginal communities can invite school staff to attend such events
- recognizing the need for Aboriginal role models; many schools and districts have increased the number of Aboriginal staff in support positions but there are few Aboriginal staff in instructional and leadership roles; districts are encouraged to actively recruit and retain Aboriginal educators, and to use Aboriginal parents and elders as counselors or teaching resources, whether on a paid or voluntary basis
- avoiding tokenism; in an effort to be more culturally responsive, some schools and districts have set aside a single meeting of their Parent Advisory Council to discuss Aboriginal issues, and/or included Aboriginal parents in these meetings on a one-time-only basis; more effective strategies involve the inclusion of Aboriginal issues as a standing PAC agenda item, or the active recruitment of Aboriginal parents as full-time members of the local PAC
- ensuring that school-Aboriginal parent meetings are structured and have a clear sense of purpose; many schools have noted that, regardless of where they were held, meetings between school staff and Aboriginal parents were better attended and much more successful when they had a set agenda and were incorporated with other activities, such as school orientation
- acknowledging the role of incentives in encouraging parent participation; parents from all cultures may be more likely to attend a school event that includes such things as door prizes or draws and is seen as more of a social opportunity than simply a meeting with school staff.

Community Inclusiveness Activities

These activities can be important bridge-builders, helping schools become more culturally aware and encouraging Aboriginal families to see their school as a valuable community resource. Key considerations in this area include:

- recognizing that local Aboriginal people can provide important guidance and advice to schools and districts on how best to engage Aboriginal families; Aboriginal parents and communities should be involved in relevant program and policy decisions, and actively recruited to assist in structuring effective school-parent communication strategies
- ensuring that Aboriginal needs and interests are taken into account when structuring school extra-curricular activities

Community Inclusiveness Activities – cont'd

- acknowledging the importance of making schools welcoming for Aboriginal parents outside regular teaching hours; some schools have been particularly successful in encouraging parent participation by establishing Aboriginal "parent clubs" in schools, focusing on subjects in which parents have expressed an interest, such as reading, cooking, arts or culture; others have had success with joint parent-student activities such as parent-daughter participation in social events associated with International Women's Day
- exploring a wide range of options for cultural inclusiveness; for example, schools may wish to incorporate Aboriginal art or traditions in their school design and daily activities, or they may use traditional Aboriginal approaches to address problems such as bullying
- ensuring that events and activities designed to encourage inclusiveness are not misinterpreted as "Aboriginal only"; these events should be actively promoted as welcoming to all, regardless of culture or heritage.

CONCLUSION

The ideas and observations in this paper are put forward with one central goal – to encourage all partners in the education system to think about, talk about and implement new, innovative, creative and more effective approaches to enhancing school-Aboriginal parent partnerships. Research has shown that parent involvement is the single most important determinant of students' success in school. It has also found that there are specific barriers to Aboriginal parents' involvement in education.

We all have a role to play in overcoming these barriers and ensuring that Aboriginal students are supported – and feel supported – by their families, their communities and their schools. This paper offers a range of options for building, and building on, the partnerships that can make school a more successful and meaningful experience for these students.

Let this paper inspire you and spark new ideas. Share it with your colleagues, and your community. Talk to people, and work with people, to build effective partnerships, and don't forget to access the other resources available in your community – including Aboriginal peoples themselves – and through the ministry's Web site.

Aboriginal students have the same rights, and deserve the same opportunities as others to succeed in school, and in life. We need to provide those opportunities by working together in partnership in all of our communities.